**High St Uniting Church Frankston**

**Faithful in Connection Luke 18: 1 – 8**

So, the meaning of this strange little parable from Jesus is pretty clear, isn’t it?

We should all be God botherers and nag God in prayer until we get what we want.

That’s the danger when we read an ancient piece of teaching without doing the necessary translation for culture and oratorial style. This parable of the widow seeking a judgement in her favour from an insensitive judge is almost impenetrable from the point of our culture. Where are the lawyers, where is the proper court proceedings? And is Luke serious with the literal Greek translations – that the judge was concerned that the widow would come one day and give him a black eye? And then, in oratory style, the comparison of the judge to God goes completely over our heads. We never have comparisons in that style in our philosophical or theological discussions. And it’s certainly not what we expect in parables – parables are meant to be ‘the kingdom of God is like’, not ‘you know how people behave on earth, well God isn’t like that.’ Even though we do see the same argument in another part of Luke where he compares earthly fathers - who know not to give bad surprises to their children who ask for treats – with our Heavenly Father who is always ready to give good things to us.

Given all of that, my first reaction on seeing what the text was for this week made me go looking for what else was in the Lectionary – the reading from Jeremiah about God making a new covenant and writing it on our hearts looked good! But then I thought how important this passage is for us in the church right now. Jesus has been gone a long time and everywhere we look in the world there are cries and fervent prayers for justice – will there still be faith on earth?

There are two keys to making this passage come alive for us here and now – context and the very nature of Jesus. We read this passage today as a stand-alone parable but, as often happens, the lectionary selection has pulled this teaching out of its wider setting. Look back into chapter 17 and you can see that Jesus is talking about that mysterious thing called the End Times. A pharisee asks Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, and you can sense that by the time Luke got around to writing his Gospel – in fact when all the writers got around to writing down the stories of Jesus – this was a real question in the minds of the Early Church. “Jesus said he was coming back, it’s been 50 years or more, when will that happen and how much longer do we have to wait?” And so, Jesus tells this parable.

And before we get lost in misunderstanding the parable as a call to nag God, let’s reflect on what we know of Jesus. Does that sound like Jesus? Or is it more in the character of the Jesus we know for this to be a story with him having a bit of a twinkle in the eye and telling an outrageous story to get attention and then adding a twist to say, “Live your life in these difficult times through faithful prayer, trusting in the grace and love of our God of justice.”

Here we are almost 2000 years later, still in difficult times, and wondering the same thing as the Pharisee and the Early Church, ‘when will God’s kingdom of justice come about and how much longer do we have to wait?’ And somehow the message to just keep on praying isn’t quite enough. On one hand prayer is easy – bring your praise and your concerns and your requests to God, because there are things that are too big and too difficult for us on our own. One the other hand, prayer is for many a very difficult subject – ‘my prayers never seem to get beyond the ceiling, I’ve prayed and prayed, and nothing happens, my prayers don’t get answered’. And this little parable that says, ‘just keep praying, God will not be slow in bringing justice’, doesn’t seem connected to the realities of this complex, unjust world.

*I don’t know if you have seen the movie, Bruce Almighty. In it, and it is a farce, God wants to go on holiday and hands his powers to Bruce to take over. In one scene, Bruce is answering prayers - imagined as a great heavenly computer with emails – and he gets a bit bored and frustrated and hits the ‘Yes to all’ button! And the effects are devastating. Everyone wins the lotteries and raffles, all the patients who didn’t pray want to know why they are the only ones in hospital! Bruce gets his first lesson in the complexities of being God.*

While that’s just a farcical Hollywood view of God and faith and prayer, it does give us pause in considering, “Why aren’t our prayers answered?” Thatreality of a complex, unjust world cuts both ways. What if the situation that we are praying so faithfully about is, actually, a lot more complex than we thought and we really should be trusting enough to leave it in the hands of God?So, keep faithfully praying, but also listen for answers that aren’t what we expected.

And remember, there is a little aphorism that is true and worthy of considering.

Prayer is more about changing us than changing God’s mind.

Even though the line, ‘your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ is missing from Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, that is the reality of how we are to live out this time. Let our ongoing, faithful prayers for justice connect us to an understanding of God’s will, so that we can do it, here and now, and not just pray, and wait for God to act.

One of my favourite Old Testament stories is Elijah challenging the Prophets of Baal to a sacrifice fire fight on the mountain top. While the point of the story is about demonstrating the primacy of God, it’s also a good story about prayer. Elijah ridicules the Baal prophets for their long-winded prayers filled with chants and cries. And he responds with a simple heart-felt request to God. Our formal worship prayers are often not a good example of how to communicate with God; too many words, too remote from our emotions, and too formal and awe-struck. And the lessons of the parables and words of Jesus offer an alternative – bold, simple, heart-felt, private and never-ending prayers that rest and live in our trust in a loving, just, and attentive god. The God of Jesus the Christ who lived with us and called us to pray without losing heart. Amen.